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A Sage on the stage or *a Guide on the side?* On student-teacher dialogue in the Web-enhanced writing classroom at the tertiary level

Introduction

That the advent of new technologies has permeated and reshaped almost every walk of life does not lend itself to criticism. It also seems apparent that the modern education system is undergoing extensive transformation in which the role of the student, as well as that of the educator are being redefined. Needless to day, providing new communication channels, Information Age tools afford new modes of student-teacher dialogue. Thus, classroom interaction reaches beyond bricks-and-mortar reality and ventures into the virtual world, which, understandably, can also be observed in foreign language (FL) learning. Not surprisingly, learners – empowered by supportive and responsive teachers – cease to be passive recipients of knowledge and, consequently, take on more active roles initiating interaction with their instructors. The article addresses the issue of constructive two-way communication that lies at the heart of modern FL instruction. The author examines the nature of student-teacher interaction in the Web-enhanced writing classroom and explores ways in which the writing instructor may stimulate students' cognitive activity and encourage them to contribute to a fruitful exchange of ideas. She provides examples of effective writing tasks promoting students' autonomy and reflection, and stimulating successful cooperation with the instructor.

Role of dialogue in adult learning

It was already in ancient Greece that the role of *dialogos* – a basic form of communication involving a conversation of at least two people – was given due prominence by the then progressive educators. Typical of Plato's idea of dialogue was the teacher's absolute commitment to individual contact with the learner, as well as his/her management of the conversation inspired by the communication provided by the latter. Needless to

say, open dialogues were conducted in a partnership atmosphere, with teachers respecting their interlocutors (Ledzińska, 2000) and promoting their active participation in an exchange of ideas. Similarly, Confucius's words, dating back to 450 BC, "Tell me and I will forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand" were an invitation to two-way communication. In the same vein, centuries later, during the Enlightenment era, Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his work *Émile ou de l'éducation* encouraged educators to inspire learners and to arouse their cognitive curiosity, with a view to fostering their independent thinking and promoting their research skills.

Understandably, since dialogue stimulates reflection and involves one's attention, imagination, memory and decision-making processes (Ledzińska, 2000), its role in modern education cannot be denied its importance either. It should be underlined, however, that dialogue is possible only when the interlocutors listen actively to each other's reasoning and take into account their partner's perspective. As such, it is an important tool that aids one's continual learning and development. Not only does it enhance a student's sense of his/her own worth but it is also a psychological prerequisite for a student's development of cognitive and metacognitive skills (Ledzińska, 2000). The teacher's role then is that of a facilitator and moderator who initiates interaction in which the student actively participates and which he/she learns to maintain and manage.

It should be remembered, though, that shifting responsibility for initiating interaction onto the shoulders of an independent student is a gradual process determined by numerous factors. Among the conditions that may impede this transformation one may point to: students' intellectual passivity (brought about by years of conditioning in school) and the hierarchical nature of institutionalized learning settings, including universities. An open student-teacher dialogue is possible only when the teacher assumes the role of an impartial observer and advisor assisting students in their quest for knowledge and inspiring their research and exploration of the world. As Brookes and Grundy (1990: 68–69) rightly observe, transforming students' awareness and promoting their reflection require a change in their attitudes towards "the learning of how to learn." Thanasoulas (2002), on the other hand, recognizes the relevance of a supportive classroom atmosphere and a cohesive learner group to motivating students and increasing their commitment. Likewise, Edmunds *et al.* (1999), who discuss principles underpinning adult learning methodology, recommend establishing a pleasant learning climate that is based on "mutual respect, collaboration rather than competition, support rather than judgment, mutual trust and fun." The authors mention five basic principles of adult education including: leadership, experience, appeal, respect and novel styles (Edmunds *et al.*, 1999), arguing that these form the foundation for effective adult learning. Further, they suggest that educators should aim to honor adult learners' individuality and to let them experience a respectful and participant-centered learning environment. It is in this environment that learning can take place and in which learners' cognitive activity may be triggered off.

Finally, achieving constructive dialogue by the teacher and an adult learner requires that the participants establish what they disagree on before they explore alternative solutions. The priority, however, is to understand each other's needs and line of reasoning. Thus, instead of being a verbal battle, constructive dialogue entails cordiality and strengthens the bond between the teacher and the student. Yet, the ultimate goal is to

stimulate students' reflection and to promote their spirit of inquiry, which converges with the aims of constructivist theories defining learning as an active process of the construction of meaning and advocating a learner's personal construction of the world's representation (Myczko, 2005).

Student-teacher dialogue in Web-enhanced FL learning

Constructivist FL education, with instructors acting as facilitators of the learner's cognitive activity and reflection, has come a long way from tedious grammar-oriented instruction, with the teacher claiming the status of an infallible authority. Perceptibly, *the sage on the stage* model is becoming a thing of the past, giving way to *the guide on the side* approach empowering students and motivating them to generate knowledge instead of merely receiving it. Warschauer and Whittaker (1997) use the above terms referring to decentred communication enabled by network-based teaching and learning. They recommend that teachers should become cooperative partners rather than usurp the role of faultless experts.

Referred to as "emergent" pedagogy, the new teaching model aims to shape independent and flexible individuals who will be able to take up challenges posed by the information society (Pelgrum and Voogt, 2007: 12). As a consequence, the traditional FL pedagogical approach, involving teacher-directed instruction, is being gradually superseded by student-centered education. In line with constructivist approaches, FL teachers cease to prescribe the form and the content of classroom activities. Instead, they increasingly frequently stimulate students to construct meaning and to create their own solutions. Students, on the other hand, taking advantage of new tools, interact and collaborate both with their peers and with their instructors, sharing experiences and seeking creative solutions to real-life problems.

Urged by the needs of the information society, modern FL teachers place emphasis on promoting students' autonomy and enhancing their collaborative construction of meaning. Here, technology comes to their aid. Understandably, apart from the obvious goal of developing students' language competence, Web-based FL learning aims to foster the development of students' ability to obtain, select, process and verify information, as well as the stimulation of their cognitive activity and research skills coupled with the improvement of their social and organizational abilities. Naturally, one cannot overlook the obvious connection between the classroom environment and authentic settings in which students are to apply the newly-acquired skills and knowledge.

It should be stated, though, that Web-enhanced FL learning does not eliminate the teacher from the learning process. Yet, it entails a change in his/her traditional role. A teacher who decides to incorporate new technologies into his/her curriculum is expected to act as a guide, advisor and coordinator of autonomous learners-researchers. Among the roles of modern teachers in "emergent" pedagogy, Voogt and Odenthal (1997 cited in Pelgrum and Voogt, 2007: 49) list:

- Using instructional methods aimed at stimulation of active learning;
- Focusing on learners' individual needs and interests;

- Active creation of the learning environment for students;
- Guiding students' cooperation;
- Active support of students' learning process (involving provision of feedback and stimulation of reflection);
- Sharing responsibility with students for their learning process.

In the same way, Warschauer and Whittaker (1997) maintain that "Teachers' contributions in a learner-centred, network-enhanced classroom include coordinating group planning, focusing students' attention on linguistic aspects of computer mediated texts, helping students gain meta-linguistic awareness of genres and discourses, and assisting students in developing appropriate learning strategies." The authors also encourage involving students in the negotiation of the course content, as well as consulting them about the implementation of technologies in the course design, which might assume the form of anonymous surveys or class discussions (Warschauer and Whittaker, 1997).

On the other hand, students are expected to become independent and responsible team players who can plan their learning paths and monitor their own progress (Voogt and Odenthal (1997 cited in Pelgrum and Voogt, 2007: 49). Also, self-instructional systems, including technology-based approaches, allow for students' contributions being a mixture of emotions, attitudes, values, abilities and strategies, as well as needs, interests, knowledge and skills (Dickinson, 1993: 62). Referring to Warschauer (1996), Benson (2001: 139) states that use of "computer-mediated communication tools in language learning leads to more student-initiated interactions, a social dynamic based on student-student collaboration, more student-centered discussion and a shift in authority from teacher to student."

It should also be stressed that Internet communication channels, whose role in the reshaped educational context cannot be denied, enable the sender and the receiver not only instant access to vast language resources, but also the swapping of their primary roles, thanks to which the teacher and the student – acting as partners and coauthors – may be engaged in a meaningful synchronous or asynchronous dialogue. And even though in the case of online communication one may observe departure from traditional standards of written language, as well as the overwhelming presence of dialogues and colloquial language, the possibility of the application of the Internet in FL writing instruction may not be questioned.

Promotion of student-teacher dialogue in Web-enhanced writing instruction

Obviously, Web resources may be a source of inspiration that enhances and supports students' writing performance. Student empowerment in the Web-enhanced writing classroom may be attained thanks to tools like Web quests, e-mail projects, blogs, tandem learning, podcasting, multimedia presentations or online videos, to name only a few. It should be noted though that the implementation of Web resources in writing instruction is premised on the idea that "learning to write" entails "learning to learn" and that students develop their writing and editing skills, as well as discover new knowl-

edge and reflect on their learning skills. What is more, online networking creates an authentic context for writing (for readers other than the teacher). Not surprisingly, in online communication students tend to be more active than in the classroom and, as a result, without further encouragement from the teacher, they initiate more interactions with their peers and with the instructor as well.

Yet, on the downside of the unprecedented accessibility of visual media, one should mention psychological problems that are likely to arise due to the influx of an enormous amount of information. It is apparent that easy access to a great deal of online data will not necessarily lead to its processing into a student's working knowledge. Predictably, learners appear to be unprepared for structuring so much information and thus they are unable to transform it into experience or problem-solving skills (Ledzińska, 2000). It is therefore the teacher's task to provide support whenever necessary, and to assist students in harnessing the overwhelming technology (Warschauer and Whittaker, 1997). Hence, a writing instructor's priority should be to teach his/her students not only how to write using online resources (including dictionaries, style guides, thesauri or language corpora), but also how to search for, select and verify Web content.

Targeting adult learners at the tertiary level and bearing in mind the importance of stimulation of active learning and independent thinking, the author designed writing tasks involving the application of Web resources and promoting student-student as well as student-teacher interaction. Here, it should be stressed that at the beginning of the writing course, the teacher and the students negotiated the rules which they would have to observe during the course and which would facilitate their dialogue and cooperation. The "contract" shaped the reciprocal relation between the instructor and the students, and provided for their respective rights and obligations, enabling a dialogue based on partnership and mutual respect. It accounted for both the students' needs and those of the teacher. The author adopted the process writing approach with a view to enhancing students' awareness of the writing process and improving their digital literacy. The assignments included, among other tasks, writing a research paper based on Web sources, online collaborative editing of articles, participation in an e-mail project aimed at the creation of an online guide with links to Web sites featuring British and American social and cultural life, as well as creative writing practice. The discussed writing tasks have been originally described by Czernek (in press). The most important information concerning the tasks, i.e. procedure, teacher's and students' roles as well student-teacher interaction are presented in Table 1.

Since it seems evident that university students should be able to independently examine, verify, and assess source materials, the author asked her students to write, relying on Web sources, a research paper about a controversial person. However, in order to raise the students' awareness of the writing and editing process, she asked them to submit completed papers together with annotated source materials which they used to support their line of argument. The students were to indicate the parts of the texts which they paraphrased, summarized or quoted (using the letters P, S, and Q, accordingly). During one-to-one consultations, the teacher provided feedback on the choices made by the students and stimulated their reflection, encouraging them to re-read the primary sources as well as their own texts. She pointed to the students' strengths and, at the same time, suggested areas for improvement. It is worth underlining that the task enabled the

Table 1. Selected Web-based writing tasks promoting student-teacher dialogue.

Description of Writing Task 1	**Online editing of an article (collaborative writing)** Students write the first drafts of their articles and post them on the university e-learning platform that can be accessed only by the writing course participants. The teacher verifies the first drafts and adds comments, adding links to relevant Web sites, where students can find information that will help them improve the form and the content of their articles. Students create the second drafts and post them on the platform, so that other students could provide their feedback and suggest improvements. The authors of the second drafts analyse feedback from other students and edit their texts prior to the submission of the third drafts to the teacher. The teacher verifies, edits, and evaluates the articles and posts their final versions on the platform in an area that can be accessed by all university students.
Web resources	– university e-learning platform
Teacher's role	– increases students' awareness of the writing process; – provides pre-text feedback; – verifies and edits students' final products.
Students' role	– provide online feedback on other students' writing; – revise and edit their own articles; – submit revised versions of their articles.
Type of student--teacher interaction	– asynchronous

Description of Writing Task 2	**Writing a research paper** Students select a controversial person (fictitious or real) and formulate a thesis statement related to this person. Students write a research paper based on a variety of reliable Web sources, trying to substantiate their argument. Students submit their final product (revised research paper) together with the source materials which they used to defend their thesis statements. In the source materials, students indicate which parts of the texts were summarised in their research papers, which were paraphrased and which were quoted (using the letters S, P or Q, respectively).
Web resources	– Web sites selected by students
Teacher's role	– verifies the final product; – assesses the selection of Web resources and the manner in which they were used in the research paper; – provides feedback (face-to-face communication with students).
Students' role	– search for, and verify the reliability of relevant Web resources; – write a research paper in which they defend their thesis statements; – submit the final product and annotated source materials.
Type of student--teacher interaction	– synchronous – asynchronous

Description of Writing Task 3	**E-mail project – creation of an online "British and American Studies Guide"** Students create an online guide with links to Web resources providing information on British and American life and institutions. The guide is to contain links to, and brief reviews of the recommended Web sites. The teacher provides a list with topics to students and the latter decide themselves who is going to find which resources. Students work in groups of two or three and cooperate by exchanging e-mails. The groups e-mail their draft reviews to members of the other groups and receive feedback from other students who suggest improvements and edit other students' reviews. At the same time, they provide feedback on other students' writing. Eventually, students submit the final version of their reviews to the group leaders, who e-mail the final version of the whole guide to the teacher. Students' work results in the creation of an online guide with Web resources for students who wish to find information on British and American life and institutions. Following students' completion of the project, students fill in questionnaires on their participation in the project, in which they perform self-evaluation and in which they share their experiences and recommendations for future project participants. Students also take part in a discussion concluding the project.
Web resources	– students' e-mail accounts; – Web sites selected by students.
Teacher's role	– initiates the writing task (provides students with topics); – provides support, guidance and encouragement; – verifies, edits and assesses the final product (online guide created by students); – stimulates students' reflection.
Students' role	– organise and divide their work; – cooperate with other students; – submit the final product to the teacher.
Type of student--teacher interaction	– asynchronous

students both to select the topics and to explore the lives of people who fascinated or intrigued them. The teacher's role consisted in initiating the writing task, guiding the students' Web exploration and, finally, assessing the selection of source materials and the manner in which the students incorporated them into their own writing. She attempted to act like *a guide on the side* rather than a critical judge, interacting with students in face-to-face communication, as well as providing feedback via e-mail.

Another example of student-teacher cooperation advocated by the author was that of online collaborative editing. Here, the students posted the first drafts of their articles on the university e-learning platform, so that other course participants could access and

peer review their work. Additionally, the teacher provided feedback, adding her comments with links to useful Web sites, where the authors could find relevant information regarding the content of their articles or writing techniques. Eventually, improved versions of the articles were made generally available online. It should be noted that by participating in collaborative editing and peer reviewing, the students learnt to view writing as a process involving revision and verification of their original ideas. Noticeably, the teacher aimed to facilitate the students' writing and to provide support, where needed. In addition, the author promoted asynchronous student-student interaction by initiating an e-mail project. Also in this writing assignment, the participants peer reviewed their texts, by exchanging e-mails, and learned how to cooperate with other student-writers. Surprisingly, they seemed to have difficulty organizing their cooperation and dividing work among themselves. Still, the teacher refrained from interfering with the organizational aspects of the project. Instead, she encouraged student-student dialogue and assessed its outcome.

Last but not least comes creative writing, which, as the author firmly believes, should be included, alongside academic writing, in the curriculum at the tertiary level. Naturally, thanks to creative situations initiated by the writing instructor, students learn how to be assertive, nonconformist and unconventional. As a result, they become more open-minded and ready to accept "otherness" in writing expression. Related to the above are, understandably, abstract thinking, intrinsic motivation and a sense of one's worth. As can be expected, building a creative environment in the writing classroom depends on the attitude of teachers themselves: their resourcefulness, flexibility, and willingness to enter into dialogue with students, as well as readiness to accommodate their needs.

To help students unleash their creative writing potential and to inspire them to experiment with the written word, the author provided her students with incentives for expressive writing. Creative writing tasks included, for instance, writing poems inspired by visual stimuli, key words or a song. In addition, the students were encouraged to post their poems on a Web site promoting novice writers' prose and poetry (www.fictionpress.com). In the case of another creative writing assignment, the students were expected to read excerpts from modern fiction (downloaded from online libraries) and then to select a character with which they were "to conduct" a fictitious interview or whose "reflections" they were supposed to describe in a fictitious diary. Even though most of the student-writers enjoyed creative writing classes, some appeared skeptical, as they feared that their texts might be laughed at by the teacher or other students. Still, thanks to expressive writing assignments, the students tried to express authentic emotions and shared them with the teacher, which, in consequence, created a stronger student-teacher bond.

Conclusion

As has been shown, the Web offers many possibilities of enhancing FL teaching, including writing instruction. Perceptibly, Web-based learning results from the interplay between teacher, learner, content and materials. Yet, its effectiveness depends not only

on the learning infrastructure, but also on the personal characteristics of the instructor and the learners, and, finally, their interaction. Needless to say, the availability of Web resources does not automatically change the educational content or the roles of the actors taking part in the learning process. Conversely, the potential of the new learning infrastructure may be fully used only in the case of a transfer of teachers' and students' traditional roles and a change in the form of student-teacher dialogue. Authors like Pelgrum and Voogt (2007: 13) aptly observe that information era pedagogy, as opposed to industrial era education, targets student-directed productive learning, cooperation of heterogeneous groups and peer support. Similarly, Warschauer and Whittaker (1997) recognize the importance of integration and networking, and of ongoing consultations with students.

In view of the above, the author's approach to writing instruction offered the students a chance to assume more responsibility for their learning process and to develop their writing as well as study skills. It converged with the postulates of educators who advocate using writing instruction for encouraging students' capacity for reflection, teaching critical thinking and developing competences that are necessary in the information society. Hence, the author's role was that of a coordinator and facilitator, whereas the students were encouraged to analyze and synthesize input material, to do research and explore Web resources, to solve real-life problems by collaborating with peers and, finally, to monitor their own writing and to perform self-assessment. All things considered, the tasks undeniably helped the course participants to shed their inhibitions and to become more autonomous writers. With time, the author observed a visible change in their attitudes, which filled her with enthusiasm and encouraged her to continue her dialogue with students.

Yet, it should be pointed out that implementing new tools in the writing classroom requires that the course design and the teaching methods be remodeled and that student-teacher interaction be reshaped. Inevitably, with modern teachers losing their status of know-it-all experts and shifting more responsibility onto students, the *sage on the stage* scenario will have to give way to the *guide on the side* model. It also seems likely that student-teacher dialogue will evolve into students' multilateral interaction with instructors, learning materials and educational technologies. However, whether technology improves students' writing and editing skills, and the quality of student-teacher communication will depend primarily on the manner in which information society tools are implemented in FL instruction.

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